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ABSTRACT

MOO stands for "Multi-user domain, Object-Oriented." Early multi-user domains, or "MUDs," began as net-based dungeons-and-dragons type games, but MOOs have evolved from these origins to become some of cyberspace's most fascinating and engaging online communities. MOOs are social environments in a text-based virtual reality where people gather to chat with friends, meet new people, and help build the MOO. Users connect from anywhere in the world and communicate with one another in real time. Users can create rooms, objects, and programs that recreate in text anything the user might imagine. Educational MOOs have an academic theme and use a variety of MOO communication tools such as internal e-mail, newspapers, documents, blackboards, and classrooms to accommodate a variety of teaching styles. Teachers can use these tools in harmony with the goals for the class while exploiting the nature of the MOO as a student-centered learning environment. The paper provides: names, descriptions, and sites of some educational MOOs suitable for learners of high school age and older; a description of user roles on MOOs--guests, builders, programmers, wizards, and archwizards; difficulties teachers may face when using a MOO; information on how to get started; and guidelines for ensuring a positive experience for both teachers and students. Resources for more information on educational MOOs are provided. (SWC)

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Educational MOO: Text-based Virtual Reality for Learning in Community

An ERIC Digest

by Lonnie Turbee

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Educational MOO: Text-based Virtual Reality for Learning in Community

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What is a MOO?

MOO stands for "**M**ulti-user domain, **O**bject-**O**riented." Early multi-user domains, or "MUDs," began as net-based dungeons-and-dragons type games, but MOOs have evolved from these origins to become some of cyberspace's most fascinating and engaging online communities. These are social environments in a text-based virtual reality where people gather to chat with friends, meet new people, and help build the MOO.

Users (sometimes called players or characters) connect from anywhere in the world and are able to communicate with others in real time (as opposed to the delayed communication of e-mail). Users can create rooms, objects, and programs that recreate in text anything the user might imagine. For example, "Gregor" at schMOOze University created a monkey that hands out dry towels to swimmers. This program causes lines of text describing the monkey's actions to appear at regular intervals on the screens of all the users in the same "room."

What is an educational MOO?

An educational MOO has an academic theme and uses a variety of MOO communication tools such as internal e-mail, newspapers, documents, blackboards, and classrooms to accommodate a variety of teaching styles. Teachers can use these tools in harmony with the goals for the class while exploiting the nature of MOO as a student-centered learning environment.

Most MOOs are not designed with specific academic purposes in mind, and some are simply not appropriate for young people. The following successful educational MOOs, however, are suitable for learners of high school age and older.

- **Diversity University, Inc.** http://www.du.org/ —a nonprofit organization providing MOO environments for innovative approaches to learning. Click on "Visit DU MOO" to access the MOO, or see their web gateway: http://moo.du.org:8888/ .
- **Virtual Educational Environment (VEE)** http://www.athena.edu/ —at Virtual Online University, Inc., a nonprofit corporation providing computer-mediated distance education classes and services.
- **MundoHispano** http://web.syr.edu/~lmturbee/mundo.html —a well-populated, virtual representation of dozens of cities in the Spanish-speaking world, written entirely in Spanish, for learners, teachers, and native speakers.
- **MOOfrancais** http://www.teleport.com/~dispatch/moofrancais.html —modeled after Paris, a well-organized MOO for learners, teachers, and native speakers of French, entirely in French.
- **schMOOze University** http://www.cc.rim.or.jp/~awaji/schMOOze/ —built to resemble a small college, learners can practice English and socialize with other learners as well as native speakers of English.
- **PennMOO** http://dept.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/moo-home.html —the virtual classroom site in the English Department of the University of Pennsylvania.

What can different kinds of users do on a MOO?

Those who first connect to a MOO are called *guests*. Guests have the ability to "talk," send messages across the MOO by "paging," use MOOmail for sending messages, and move around the MOO. They cannot make any permanent changes in their guest "character," nor can they create objects.

Those who want a permanent character with password access need to request this, usually by sending e-mail or MOOmail to the registrar (often the owner) of the MOO. Permanent characters can name themselves, describe themselves, and set their gender. Users come to know one another, forming friendships and a sense of community. These relationships can be one of the most rewarding aspects of the MOO experience.

Builders are users that have programming permissions for creating rooms, exits, and objects which they can describe in any way that is consistent with the MOO's theme. They can also write customized, durable "messages" that automatically appear when certain commands are used. For example, when a user pages "MariLuz" at MundoHispano, that user will see a line of text in Spanish stating that a kangaroo puts the message in its pocket and carries it to MariLuz.

Those who learn the MOO programming language can become *programmers* who create more elaborate features such as Gregor's monkey. The ability to create objects, "messages," and programs gives the user a sense of ownership, an outlet for creative writing, and motivation to return.

The *wizards* are at the top of the hierarchy. They create new characters, monitor connections, teach new users, and deal with problems, often with the help of teacher-administrators. They also do deep-level programming and uniquely have access to information such as the users' e-mail addresses. In most MOOs, the *archwizard* is the one who founded the MOO, is the systems operator of the

MOO server (computer on which the MOO resides), and is considered the director and ultimate decision-maker.

What difficulties can I expect when using a MOO?

Some teachers are uncomfortable with the loss of control over student behavior that inevitably occurs. Teachers should help students create personally meaningful tasks before the MOO is accessed, to be followed up with an assessment of outcomes. As an example, language learners might decide what topics they want to discuss with native speakers, then later report to the class what they learned, who taught it to them, and what web sites support their findings.

Some MOO users have quite an emotional response, positive or negative, to the experiences they have. Students have been known to fall in love with or be very offended by other users. While the sense of place and permanence that is achieved on MOO can contribute to the meaningfulness of the learning experience, some users simply have difficulty adjusting to having a virtual self (their "character") somewhere in cyberspace. Teachers need to regularly schedule in-class discussions that focus on student reaction to MOO use.

Finally, some students come with poor keyboarding skills and others are uncomfortable with using technology in general. These students need extra attention and time to use the MOO. Pairing them up with a more technically savvy partner during MOO homework time is a good idea.

How do I get started?

Teachers should spend several weeks becoming familiar with the technology and the psycho-sociological experiences associated with MOO before introducing it to their students. Using a MOO can be like going to a foreign country, and students need to count on their teacher to be a knowledgeable guide.

Technical considerations must be handled first: connecting to the MOO via telnet, and doing it in a user-friendly way using a MUD client program. Given that MOO is a program that runs on a remote computer, it is accessed by opening a telnet program, typing in the server name and port number, and then connecting at the log-in screen of the MOO. An example: open telnet on your own machine. Type in **schmooze.hunter.cuny.edu** where the host name is requested, and type in **8888** where the port number is requested. This will take you to the log-in screen of schMOOze University. At that point, you can type **connect guest** or, if you already have a permanent character, you can type **connect <name> <password>**.

If you connect without using a MUD client, you will find that the lines of text you are writing are interrupted by incoming text from others. This can be most disconcerting. MUD clients, which can be downloaded for free, have a variety of features. The most useful is one which prevents others' text from interrupting yours.

To ensure a positive MOO experience for you and your students:

- Become familiar with the technology and the social dynamics of MOO use. Read web sites about educational and social MOOs and provide appropriate web addresses to your students.
- Work the MOO into your class schedule, planning for at least three in-lab MOO training sessions.
- Facilitate in-class design of tasks to be completed in the MOO for homework. Decide how these tasks will be assessed.
- Have your students write journals about their MOO experiences and plan for regular in-class discussions.
- Expect your students to teach you. Many MOO wizards are under age 15!

Where can I find more information on educational MOO?

- **How to connect to a MUSH/MOO/MUD: telnet and client programs** http://fly.ccs.yorku.ca/mush/con-intro.html
- **Chaco Communications** http://www.chaco.com/ (download the excellent **Pueblo** MUD client here)
- **Educational VR (MUD) sub-page.** http://tecfa.unige.ch/edu-comp/WWW-VL/eduVR-page.html
- **DU journal of educational moos** http://tecfa.unige.ch/edu-comp/DUJVRE/vol1/DUJVRE.1.1.text
- **Journal of MUD Research** http://mellers1.psych.berkeley.edu/~jomr/
- **MOO Teacher's Tip sheet** http://www.daedalus.com/net/MOOTIPS.html
- **MOOing in a foreign language: how, why, and who?** http://web.syr.edu/~lmturbee/itechtm.html
- **MUDs, MOOs, MUSHs** http://www.itp.berkeley.edu/~thorne/MOO.html
- **NETEACH-L MOO Sessions Information** http://spot.colorado.edu/~youngerg/moodates.html
- **freya's list o' moos** http://www.teleport.com/~autumn/moo.html
- **The Palace, Inc. Virtual World Chat Software** http://www.thepalace.com/index.html (2-D MOO-like environment)

Suggested Reading

Turbee, L. (1995). MundoHispano: A Text-Based Virtual Environment for Learners and Native Speakers of Spanish. In Mark Warschauer, (Ed.), *Virtual Connections* (pp. 233-234). Manoa, HI: Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center, University of Hawaii at Manoa.

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